

UNITED NATIONS



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**REMARKS AT THE ATHENS FORUM 2014:
DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE
Athens, 15 September 2014**

Prime Minister,
Mr. Mayor,
Excellencies,
Generous hosts,

I am so grateful to be back, and to be part of building a new and expanding tradition in the Ancient Agora.

Please forgive me if join the long line of foreigners who come to Athens and talk about Pericles.

His ears must be burning more than ever today. As we observe this International Day of Democracy, we've all had reason to quote him.

But, Pericles might have asked, do we really have reason to celebrate?

He might even have wondered, as we meet here in the cradle of democracy, whether some places are becoming democracy's graveyard.

Pericles' Athens was a city open to all the world, with no aliens' laws. Today, around Europe, xenophobia is taking hold in even some of the most established democracies.

Athenian democracy advocated tolerance and freedom. In our world, hate crimes and extremism proliferate every day.

Athenian democracy paid special regard to laws for the protection of the oppressed. Today, some movements seek to impose laws for the very oppression of humankind.

On the other hand, Pericles might have chuckled that Athenian democracy's practice of ostracism -- where thousands would vote on shards of pottery to expel a potential tyrant -- may be the equivalent of the recent mass protests in Kiev's Euromaidan.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My answer would be that in the midst of the turmoil, there is reason to celebrate.

Here in Greece, in the past few years, democracy was challenged by crisis. Yet Greece is coming out of the crisis not through juntas or autocratic rule, but by democratic means.

And globally, democracy champions are manifesting extraordinary courage against extraordinary obstacles.

I spent the past few weeks at UN Headquarters negotiating several new projects for the UN Democracy Fund.

They include:

-- Civic education in Sierra Leone's Eastern provinces. Even though this is where the Ebola epidemic has taken one of the biggest tolls so far;

-- Building safe and secure independent journalism in Libya. Even though chaos and violence has recently displaced hundreds of thousands of people there;

-- Strengthening democratic practices in local governance in Ukraine, including the East of country. This is a region where the ongoing issues speak for themselves.

These and other UNDEF projects will go on undeterred. They are all implemented by local civil society groups who fight against the odds every day.

As Pericles said, freedom belongs to those who have the courage to defend it.

Prime Minister Samaras, last year at this Forum, we were deeply moved by the depth of your perspective from modern Athens. We look forward to being inspired by you again.

And we look forward to hearing two veteran thinkers and doers in the democratic arena – Danilo Türk of Slovenia and Carl Bildt of Sweden.

The presence of both visiting leaders holds special symbolic significance.

Twenty-five years ago this month, the Assembly of Slovenia passed constitutional amendments that introduced parliamentary democracy to the country.

And yesterday, Sweden voted for change in general elections with a turnout of almost 84 per cent.

Carl Bildt, special thanks to you for flying straight from the ballot box to the birthplace of democracy.

These examples illustrate that a stable democracy is not an unchanging one. It is one where change is managed peacefully and inclusively.

That both visiting leaders have a distinguished past with the United Nations makes that point even more telling.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In your printed programmes you have a personal message from the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who sends his best wishes to you. Let me quote from it:

Gatherings like the Athens Forum for Democracy are living proof that inclusive participation is not only an end in itself. It prepares communities, societies and entire countries to address opposing points of view and engage in constructive criticism and deliberations.

I hope that the Athens Forum for Democracy will encourage world leaders to hear, respect and respond appropriately to the voices of the people, whether expressed directly or through elected representatives. On this International Day of Democracy, may the spirit of Athens inspire communities and nations to work for inclusive democracy right around the world. "

Thank you very much